

Final Report 2006
Applicant: St. John's Folk Arts Council Storytelling Festival

The third annual St. John's Storytelling Festival was held November 1st to 5th. This year's event was larger and even more successful than last year's. We had storytellers from Ireland, Scotland, British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario attending, as well as storytellers from St. John's and the island. In all, 22 performers participated during the 5-day festival. The St. John's festival has now grown into the largest storytelling festival in Canada east of Montreal.



Mother Goose stories with Lori Fritz

New this year: a paid publicist, a tall tale competition (with cash prize), a joint venture with the public library, late night programming at the Newman Wine Vaults, concurrent afternoon programming, French-language storytelling workshop, partnership with The Rooms, and partnership with Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. We received funding support from the Canada Council, the Irish-Newfoundland Partnership, the Scottish Arts Council, and the City of St. John's, Cultural Capitals as well as the province's CED program.

The festival featured a wonderfully varied series of events—the tall tale telling contest, three storytelling workshops, three free performances for children (two at the Masonic and one at the AC Hunter library), an evening of tunes and tales at the Ship Pub, a late night session of murder ballads and ghost stories at the Newman Wine Vaults, two afternoon performances (one at the Masonic Temple, one at The Rooms) and three evening concerts (two at the Masonic and one at the Crow's Nest).



*Lorne Brown caught a fish
this...*



...far from shore!



Scottish storyteller and balladeer Margaret Bennett (l) listens to Anita Best (r) at The Rooms

School performances were held at Bishop Abraham Elementary, and a French language performance was given at Centre scolaire et communautaire des Grand-Vents.

One of the most important aspects of the festival is the incorporation of our own home-grown talent. When audiences hear Anita Best sing a centuries-old Newfoundland ballad, or hear Kelly Russell perform one of the wonderful Pigeon Inlet stories from his late father, Ted Russell, we can only be awed and thankful to live in a place where

storytelling is not part of a revival movement focussed on the public library system or in the halls of academe, but where it is something which comes from the beating heart of a living, unique culture.

This culture includes people like Lewis Cranford. At our festival, Lewis hosted an afternoon performance of recitations and stories, competed valiantly in our very first tall tales competition, and delivered a rather remarkable piece of epic folk poetry while enrobed in an equally remarkable giant squid costume.

The culture of storytelling here includes tellers like Gary Green of the Great Northern Peninsula, and Chris Brookes of The Battery, both important contributors to the local storytelling movement. It includes true folk performers like recitationist Tommy Oliver of Gull Island, well known at community events and weddings in Conception Bay North, who made his first St. John's performance at the festival. It also includes Bell Island resident Sarah Meyer, who at barely 16 was our youngest teller at the festival, representing the next generation of Newfoundland tellers.



Lewis "Giant Squid" Cranford at the Tall Tales Night.

It also includes respected elders like the brothers Gerard and Tobias Pearson, from the now-resettled island of Merasheen. Gerard and Tobias in turns delighted and chilled a sold-out late-night audience with their rich voices and grisly repertoire of unaccompanied murder ballads. Scattered through the candle-lit historic wine vaults where the event was held were a number of local Goth kids, drawn in by the promise of some ghoulish tales, performed by St. John's storyteller Dale Jarvis. For many of them, it was probably the first time they had ever heard the songs and stories of their forefathers performed as they once were.



Gerard and Tobias Pearson, with Dale Jarvis (l-r) in the sold-out late night Newman Wine Vaults show.

All of these tellers, and many more, including our visiting tellers from away, Norma Cameron, Judith Poirier and Lorne Brown from Canada, Anne Farrell from Ireland, and Margaret Bennett from Scotland, made it the best of our festivals to date.

Our audience has expanded every year; this year we were delighted by this continued growth and our best audiences yet. Attendance at the evening events was very good. Both Thursday and Friday nights we had approximately 70 people in attendance, Saturday over 80. The Saturday late night concert was sold out (50 in attendance, over 20 people turned away). The Sunday evening concert was at the Crow's Nest was filled to capacity (45-50). Saturday morning's free performance, sponsored by the City of St. John's, had approximately 40 in attendance; Sunday's almost double that. The Sunday afternoon event at The Rooms was sold out—120 in attendance.

Sandy Woolfrey-Fahey was invaluable as a publicist. She arranged radio promotion and interviews, television publicity, and some free print media coverage. She designed the program and sold ads in it as well, and helped arrange volunteers. The festival benefited very much from her efforts, and we intend to hire a publicist again next year. Once again the festival has been very successful economically. By giving storytelling such a visible and engaging public presence, it raises the profile generally of this art form, laying a foundation for further development in the St. John's area. We provided temporary employment for our 22 performers and hosts, as well as for our publicist. More important, some very good connections were made between storytellers in Newfoundland and tellers on the Mainland and in Ireland and Scotland; there is potential for exchange here and for local tellers to be invited to perform at other festivals and storytelling events.